

A Decolonial Curricular Approach to LIS Education

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, Puerto Rican librarians and educators have developed curricula through a decolonial and critical lens. The developed projects respond to the needs of educators and students to address the emerging crisis that Puerto Rico has undergone. School and academic librarians have partnered with schoolteachers and Education scholars to develop educational materials and projects to meet the needs of students. Recent history has led to the demand for new types of information literacy sessions. These needs are supported by U.S.-led LIS scholarship on critical pedagogy and critical-inclusive education.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

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AUTHOR KEYWORDS

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE COLONIAL LANDSCAPE IN EDUCATION SINCE 2016

In 2016 the 114th Congress of the United States and the Barack Obama administration enacted Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA Act, 2016). The enactment of PROMESA implemented the Fiscal Control Board, also referred to colloquially as “La Junta” to manage, oversee and restructure Puerto Rico’s debt as a result of the Archipelago’s financial crisis. Puerto Rican Studies scholars have compiled literature about the consequences of PROMESA. Within the discourse, social activists, educators, and libraries have met to discuss the impacts of PROMESA, the colonial status Puerto Rico, and the emerging humanitarian crisis that the archipelago has undergone (Lebrón & Bonilla, 2020). Within this humanitarian crisis, Puerto Rican librarians have gathered and archived materials of the recent history of the island, albeit the precarious conditions some of the libraries are facing after hurricanes Irma and Maria as well as the recent earthquakes in the Southern region. In addition to the collection of materials, school and academic librarians have collaborated in library advocacy projects to create educational spaces for children amidst the hardships (Redacción, 2020a; Redacción, 2020b; Editorial Casa Cuna, 2019). One of the most visible hardships the archipelago has faced is the closing of schools as a result of the massive budgetary reductions as well as the destruction of others as the result of the 2020 earthquakes in the Southern municipalities. Parallel to this, the University of Puerto Rico has also been subject to drastic

austerity measures that have threatened the services, research, and instruction (Lebrón & Bonilla, 2020).

While children and youth services are part of the forefront of the nation's education needs, these are also neglected. Inside of schools and academic institutions, librarians face the following questions: How does a librarian create an information literacy project without libraries? What does it mean to be a librarian in a colonized country? What does being a librarian it entails? In the last decade, Puerto Rican librarians and educators have developed curricula through a decolonial and critical lens. The developed curriculum projects respond to the needs of educators and students to address the emerging crisis that Puerto Rico has undergone: the imposition of PROMESA, hurricanes Irma and Maria, Summer of 2019 protests, and earthquakes in the Southern region. Puerto Rico's public, school, and academic libraries are scarce (Berrios Llorens, 2019).

In 2010 the Puerto Rico Department of Education has closed the doors to the Carnegie Library in San Juan, depriving the public from an accessible library (Berrios Llorens, 2019). Along with the closure of Carnegie, various school libraries have closed their doors or run by teachers. The only libraries that remain fully operational are college and research libraries. School and academic librarians have partnered with schoolteachers and Education scholars to create educational materials, lessons, and projects to meet the needs of students. Recent history and needs have led to the demand for new types of information literacy sessions in school as well as in academic settings. These needs are supported by U.S. led LIS scholarship on critical pedagogy and critical-inclusive education. Some of the initiatives have supported social justice frameworks, critical pedagogy, ethnic studies inclusion, as well as voicing scholarship from BIPOC and LGBTTQI+ groups (Cooke & Sweeney, 2017).

The following essay explores Information Literacy (IL) instruction, decolonizing educational research approaches, and critical pedagogies literature. Along with the aforementioned literature, the author proposes the pertinence of incorporating the elements of each of these approaches into information literacy instruction praxis in the Puerto Rican context or Hispanic Serving Institutions with Puerto Rican communities. It is through the discussion of these approaches that the author hopes that dialogue will emanate to exchange ILL experience to create lessons that address the needs of pre-service librarians and students.

A DECOLONIAL LIS EDUCATION

Decolonial education varies according to geographical location. Zavala (2016) defines a decolonial project as one "characterized by encompassing three major strategies: first, to deconstruct our very understanding of Modernity, which is traditionally conceptualized as a historically advanced expression of (Western) rationality" (p. 2). Its implication in education entails the recognition of education as a site of struggle and rupture; a site of dialogue and response to the coloniality of power (Zavala, 2016). In the case of Puerto Rico, a decolonial education recognized the struggles faced by contemporary colonial and capitalist practices imposed in the archipelago. Its application to LIS education consists of an exhaustive dialogue and revision about Puerto Rico's information literacy needs, access to educational resources, and how can LIS students be better equipped to serve its population.

In 2019 the Graduate School of Information Science and Technologies (GSIST) at the University of Puerto Rico launched its online master's degree program. The program is accredited by the American Library Association (ALA) and has two areas of focus: library and information science, and knowledge management (UPRRP, 2019). The online program

successfully migrated its in-person course offerings into an online offering. However, just like its in-person offerings, most courses do not address issues of how to serve diverse populations. Most of these discussions take place in the CAPSTONE research seminar (GSIST, 2018). Therefore, the exposure to topics such as serving populations with physical disabilities, tailoring collections that reflect race, gender, and sexuality are discussed toward the completion of the master's program. Students will rarely be exposed to topics such as meeting the needs of socioeconomically marginalized communities unless they bring the subject. There are some instances where these scenarios are brought up by the faculty. Yet, these are only mentioned as examples and not as something that will be explored through the lesson or the semester. The lack of discussion about serving diverse populations is not something unique to GSIST. In their autoethnographic reflection about LIS education, Bishop and Moffat (2016) express their lack of exposition to these topics. Likewise, Alston (2016) as well as López and Winslow (2016) state similar observations about the programs they graduated from.

The need to incorporate courses or to actively self-reflect on the practices of LIS into the class discussion is one way to respond to what Rioux (2017) calls “blind spots.” The lack of discourse about social justice, race, gender, class, and power relations that exist in the LIS landscape are some of the aspects that some practitioners come into contact with when serving multicultural communities. The “blind spots” mentioned by Rioux (2017) demonstrate that the ideas about social justice and the service to multicultural groups in LIS students are “underdeveloped and under-represented” (p. 32). This argument reflects some of the gaps that LIS education face, which is also mentioned by Bishop and Moffat (2016) in their autoethnographic account. The effects of erasing or avoiding these discussions are long-lasting. Likewise, if these are incorporated into the medullar coursework LIS programs, they can allow healing and it will help students be cognizant about the injustices that affect those who they aim to serve (Burgess, 2017).

In the case of the Puerto Rican LIS professional, the topics of race, gender, class, and decoloniality are rarely discussed. Upon the revision of the LIS curriculum offered at GSIST, this topic is only covered in CAPSTONE research or other research activities sponsored by the University of Puerto Rico. Recently, upon the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the discussion about the repercussion about Summer 2019, some LIS educators such Delgado (2020) have brought these topics forth. Delgado has created initiatives where she has collaborated with other BIPOC and LGBTQI+ librarians and educators, to discuss collection development and services that address the needs of these populations in the archipelago (Arroyo Pizarro, Denis Rosario, Lugo González, Lugo Vázquez 2020). However, these courses are offered at other private higher education institutions that offer some LIS courses for aspiring school librarians. The work of educators who bring BIPOC experiences are scarce; a similar trend observed in the United States LIS programs. Yet, one would think that the case of Puerto Rico, the discussion of BIPOC topics, and decoloniality would be more active due to the territorial condition of the archipelago. In recent years, scholars like Bonilla and LeBrón (2020) have continued to develop literature related to the effects of the PROMESA Act in Puerto Rico. The extent of the literature they have compiled includes the effects of PROMESA in public education. This includes K-12 settings as well as the austerity measures imposed on the University of Puerto Rico (Fortuño Bernier, 2017; Dávila, 2017; Bonilla & LeBrón, 2020). The University of Puerto Rico's faculty and student body have criticized the budgetary reductions it has been subjected to (Diálogo, 2018). After the devastation from hurricanes Irma and María the University of Puerto Rico faced additional challenges, some aggravated by La Junta.

The voices from LIS BIPOC practitioners into LIS education are essential to cement a sense of justice in the formation of future librarians. The inclusion of Afro-Caribbean and marginalized communities into the LIS curriculum allows us to make space to see the library profession as a tool to just, equitable, and accessible for those who are excluded from the academic spaces. Since Puerto Rico does not have a sustainable or accessible public library system, the curriculum needs to offer an insight into how to meet the needs of those that are deprived of library and information and services. By creating scenarios where future librarians can aid marginalized communities, the curriculum responds to the understanding of justice obligations that the LIS field has. These conversations and solutions need to emerge from the social, political, and economic realities of Puerto Rico. Acknowledging and working critically to educate students into navigating these topics within LIS allows them to immerse themselves in bringing forth and voicing those who have been silenced by the current structures imposed in the archipelago's academic discourse and LIS practice.

A project that has emerged from the current social, political, and economic realities of Puerto Rico is *Puerto Rico: Una sola voz*. This project is the work of two GSIST graduates and UPR librarians, Jeanmary Lugo González, and Juan Ramón Soto Rosa (2020). The work of these two Puerto Rican librarians consists of the creation of a newspaper archive about the Summer 2019 protest against former governor Ricardo Rosselló Nevarez's administration (Lugo González, 2020). The archive includes Marxist newspapers from New York, as well as publications from newspapers from the Puerto Rican diaspora. The work of Lugo González and Soto Rosa (2020) depends on donations. The interest in archiving these newspapers comes from the narratives that led to the events of the Summer of 2019. The protests held during the Summer of 2019, are the results of various government scandals regarding the handling of emergency funding after the passing of hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. Among the mishandling of emergency funds, hiding of relief supplies, and the 4,645 deaths as results of the aftermath of the hurricane. It should be mentioned that the government of Puerto Rico's official number denies the 4,645 deaths reported by a study conducted by Harvard University and published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (Kishore, Marqués, Mahmud, et al., 2018). The government's official death count is 64. After Kishore, Marqués, Mahmud, et al (2018) study former governor Rosselló Nevarez acknowledged the results from George Washington University, which led to the adjustment of 2,975 (Sosa Pascual, Campoy, & Weisseinstein, 2018; Wiscovitch, 2019). The mistrust and disgust of the archipelago's residents were exacerbated when the son of the former Puerto Rico Secretary of Treasury leaked a Telegram chat. Among the conversations that were made public, the governor and his trusted allies mocked the island poor residents and those of whom had entrusted their vote to the current administration. Furthermore, the governor used misogynist language to refer to feminist activists; i.e. Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, a feminist organization that advocates for gender justice and the protection of at-risk women (Herrera, 2019). The archival practices of the information disseminated by the media became imperative for the work at the Puerto Rico Studies Collection at the University of Puerto Rico librarians. The preservation and development of projects are part of the practices that librarians undertake to voice the marginalized.

As part of the CAPSTONE Seminar requisite, GSISTS students immerse themselves into one research project. In March 2018, Vigo Cepeda worked along with her students the topic of social responsibility and open access, as well as access for people with diverse functionality. Blanco Rivera (2018) along with his students was the only project that addressed the effects of PROMESA Act and library services. The research conducted by Blanco Rivera (2018) focused

on the development of web resources. Sánchez Lugo (2018) conducted a study about the medullar information knowledge that LIS students should possess. These are the only recent research initiatives that can be identified in the GSISTS website that address issues of equity, coloniality, and LIS curriculum. Students have the opportunity for one semester to be part of these research topics. However, there is no guarantee that these topics are discussed in the required coursework. The students are dependent on the CAPSTONE Seminar at the end of their graduate studies. Students may also be dependent on the shared resources about LIS professional issues related to Black Lives Matter, the denunciation of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) practices, or initiatives developed by the University of Puerto Rico (GSIST, 2020). Although the publication of these pieces is vital, they are scarcely part of a in-classroom discussion, something that Bishop and Moffat (2016) reflect on in their autoethnographic study. Studies like the one overseen by Sánchez Lugo (2018) may shed insight into the curricular needs that LIS graduates might have identified in their practice. Within those information needs and curricular needs, students could voice the need to discuss the current socioeconomic scenario that the University of Puerto Rico, the Department of Education, and some municipal libraries are undergoing as a result of austerity measures imposed by La Junta.

Communications and non-LIS related scholarship have documented the impact of PROMESA Act to the University of Puerto Rico (Lebrón & Bonilla, 2020; Lugo González & Soto Rosa, 2020). Blanco Rivera's (2018) CAPSTONE seminar research project aims to target LIS services and bring it into the LIS classroom. Vigo Cepeda's (2018) CAPSTONE seminar projects also bring forth the voice of marginalized sectors. On the individual scientific production, Domínguez Flores' (2019) work address the challenges that an academic library system, such as University of Puerto Rico's library system, has endured. Yet, the discussions and findings of this kind of research remains to be seen in classroom discussions. The professional praxis discussion in LIS classroom settings is vital for students who aim to be part of the profession. In the case of a LIS settings such as Puerto Rico's the discussion of social justice, race, gender, ableism, and the need to incorporate alternate voices are essential to the profession. According to Kurz (2017), even in the U.S. there is a current need to incorporate literature that addresses "real action-oriented commitment to social justice" (p. 84). Puerto Rico's LIS curriculum and literature lags the discussion of school library settings as well as municipal and independent libraries. These two settings are often the most underfunded and affected by austerity measures. Both school and municipal libraries also served underrepresented populations.

Most organizational structures taught in LIS education programs are Western and Euro-Centric ones. In the case of Puerto Rico, the literature that students are exposed to is that disseminated by North American library associations, U.S. publishing, or European publish companies (i.e. Spain). Although this literature can be enriching, it does not place at the forefront Caribbean, Latin American or Indigenous epistemologies. The prioritization of anglophone literature over Caribbean or literature from the Global South perpetuates a sense of dominance that U.S. epistemologies have over the Puerto Rican discourse in LIS education. Burgess (2017) defines the need to recognize the powers that propagate Wester epistemologies as *cognitive justice*. There are some instances where Puerto Rico LIS scholars have presented their research in U.S. LIS settings, the availability of this content is limited or difficult to access. At times, the dissemination of this knowledge has been dependent on the authors.

There is a need to teach within the cultural and geographical context of Puerto Rico. Teaching within the Caribbean cultural context allows future librarians to find pertinence in the

knowledge being discussed in LIS courses and its application to LIS practice. Burgess (2017) states that “LIS educators have to look beyond the boundaries of our discipline to bring exponential knowledge into the classroom” (p. 84). This is true to LIS educators in Puerto Rican settings. The initiatives organized by LIS professionals such as Delgado (2020), Lugo González and Soto Rosa (2020) are a direct response to the curricular needs that have been identified. Furthermore, creating IL content that meets the curricular and cultural needs of Puerto Rican students is also one of the many facets that has to be reinforced in the discussion with LIS students. The decolonization of a curriculum does not happen in isolation and spontaneously. It involves constant revisions and reflections, such as the examples presented by some LIS practitioners and scholars. In their discussion about multicultural youth services and LIS education, Hughes-Hassell and Vance (2017) reinforce this notion, which goes in hand with the development of personal philosophies regarding education. Both authors elaborate the need to be culturally competent and equity literate. Both competencies are crucial to understand the social, cultural, economic, racial, gendered, and historical contexts that define the diverse geographical regions of Puerto Rico. Given the contemporary situation in the archipelago, pre-service librarians, LIS students, and LIS educators need to continue to formulate lessons, conduct research, and expose themselves into the practices that are currently defining the work of LIS professionals as well as those they aim to serve.

The aforementioned is reflected in Zavala’s (2016) work in decolonial methodologies in education. According to Zavala’s (2016), education needs to be “repositioned and situated within broader geographic-historical processes” (p. 1). Furthermore, a decolonial curriculum engages in dialogue and reflection, that aims to critique and implements counter-storytelling to challenge the master narratives or epistemologies that have silenced BIPOC voices (Zavala, 2016). By implementing counter narratives into LIS education, educators provide students with the cultural competences to aid multicultural communities and serve those who have been excluded from library settings as a result of the colonial conditions that have permeated in the archipelago’s educational institutions.

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